

The UCSB Department of Anthropology Presents:

On Sylvan Thought

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HOW FORESTS THINK

Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human

Eduardo Kohn

Forests think. This is neither a metaphor nor is it a claim specific to any “ontology.” What kind of claim, then, is it? What right do we have in making it? And what might happen to our social theory – and the human- if we take it seriously? Thought emerges with life; it is not restricted to humans. The tropical forest of the Upper Amazon, one of the world’s most complex ecosystems, amplifies the way life thinks. In the process it makes over the thoughts of those who engage with its living logics –be these Amerindians, rubber bosses, or anthropologists. Ethnographic attention to how the Amazonian Runa interact with the many beings that ‘walk’ the forests –animals, but also the dead, and spirits- renders visible some of the strange properties of living thoughts that are occluded by the ways in which our distinctively human ways of thinking have colonized how we think about thought. Allowing ourselves to think with and through forests permits us to craft conceptual tools form the world itself in ways that provincialize

more distinctively human forms of thought. In the process our fundamental assumptions about context, complexity, and difference come into question, and so do the humanist forms of thinking we unwittingly take with us even when we seek to venture beyond the human. Here I explore how thinking with forests reveals a counter-intuitive “absential” logic that is central to living thoughts. Grasping this change show we think about materiality as well as kinds, selves, futures, and the many deaths that make life possible. Learning to think with forests is crucial if we are to hold open spaces where the sylvan thinking we share with all of life (a veritable *pensée sauvage*) can flourish –a form of thinking that is under dire threat in this, our Anthropocene.

Eduardo Kohn is the author of *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (September 2013, University of California Press) which won the 2014 Gregory Bateson Book Prize. He teaches anthropology at McGill University

Reception to follow at 5:00 p.m. in HSSB 6028